

Teachers—Special Education

(0*NET 25-2041.00, 25-2042.00, 25-2043.00)

Significant Points

- Excellent job prospects are expected due to rising enrollments of special education students and reported shortages of qualified teachers.
- A bachelor's degree, completion of an approved teacher preparation program, and a license are required to qualify; many States require a master's degree.
- Many States offer alternative licensure programs to attract people into these jobs.

Nature of the Work

Special education teachers work with children and youths who have a variety of disabilities. A small number of special education teachers work with students with mental retardation or autism, primarily teaching them life skills and basic literacy. However, the majority of special education teachers work with children with mild to moderate disabilities, using the general education curriculum, or modifying it, to meet the child's individual needs. Most special education teachers instruct students at the elementary, middle, and secondary school level, although some teachers work with infants and toddlers.

The various types of disabilities that qualify individuals for special education programs include specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairments, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, multiple disabilities, hearing impairments, orthopedic impairments, visual impairments, autism, combined deafness and blindness, traumatic brain injury, and other health impairments. Students are classified under one of the categories, and special education teachers are prepared to work with specific groups. Early identification of a child with special needs is an important part of a special education teacher's job. Early intervention is essential in educating children with disabilities.

Special education teachers use various techniques to promote learning. Depending on the disability, teaching methods can include individualized instruction, problem-solving assignments, and small-group work. When students need special accommodations in order to take a test, special education teachers see that appropriate ones are provided, such as having the questions read orally or lengthening the time allowed to take the test.

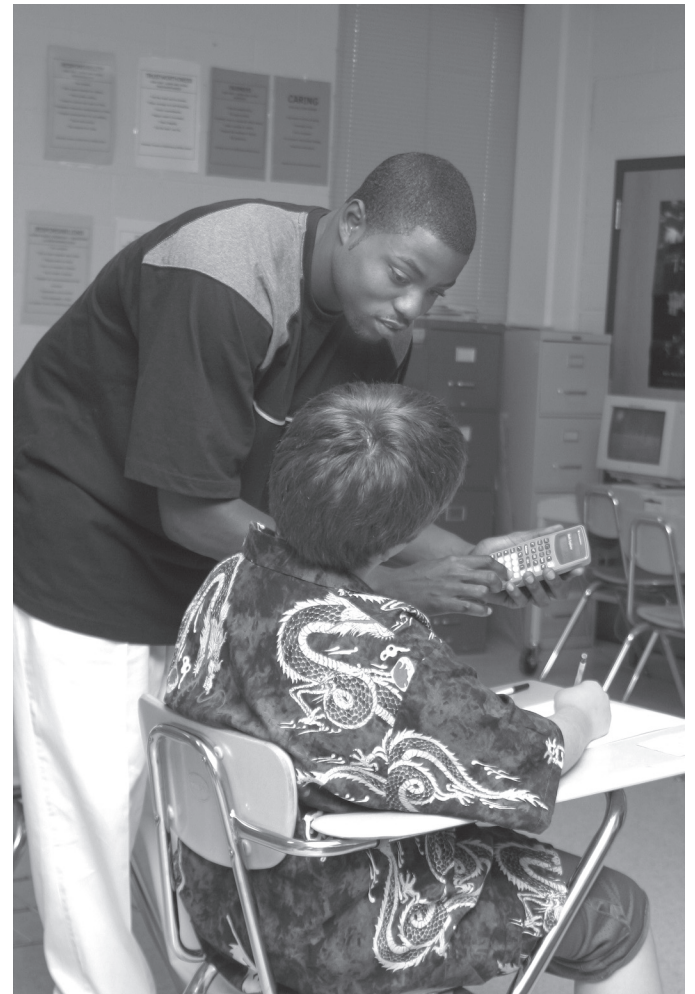
Special education teachers help to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP) for each special education student. The IEP sets personalized goals for each student and is tailored to the student's individual learning style and ability. The program includes a transition plan outlining specific steps to prepare special education students for middle school or high school or, in the case of older students, a job or postsecondary study. Teachers review the IEP with the student's parents, school administrators, and, often, the student's general education teacher. Teachers work closely with parents to inform them of their child's progress and suggest techniques to promote learning at home.

Special education teachers design and teach appropriate curricula, assign work geared toward each student's ability, and grade papers and homework assignments. They are involved in the students' behavioral and academic development, helping the students develop emotionally, feel comfortable in social

situations, and be aware of socially acceptable behavior. Preparing special education students for daily life after graduation also is an important aspect of the job. Teachers provide students with career counseling or help them learn routine skills, such as balancing a checkbook.

As schools become more inclusive, special education teachers and general education teachers are increasingly working together in general education classrooms. Special education teachers help general educators adapt curriculum materials and teaching techniques to meet the needs of students with disabilities. They coordinate the work of teachers, teacher assistants, and related personnel, such as therapists and social workers, to meet the requirements of inclusive special education programs. A large part of a special education teacher's job involves interacting with others. Special education teachers communicate frequently with parents, social workers, school psychologists, occupational and physical therapists, school administrators, and other teachers.

Special education teachers work in a variety of settings. Some have their own classrooms and teach only special education students; others work as special education resource teachers and offer individualized help to students in general education classrooms; still others teach together with general education teachers in classes composed of both general and special education students. Some teachers work with special education students for several hours a day in a resource room, separate from



Special education teachers usually modify the general education curriculum to meet an individual student's needs.

their general education classroom. Considerably fewer special education teachers work in residential facilities or tutor students in homebound or hospital environments.

Special education teachers who work with infants usually travel to the child's home to work with the child and his or her parents. Many of these infants have medical problems that slow or preclude normal development. Special education teachers show parents techniques and activities designed to stimulate the infant and encourage the growth of the child's skills. Toddlers usually receive their services at a preschool where special education teachers help them develop social, self-help, motor, language, and cognitive skills, often through the use of play.

Technology is playing an increasingly important role in special education. Teachers use specialized equipment such as computers with synthesized speech, interactive educational software programs, and audiotapes to assist children.

Working Conditions

Special education teachers enjoy the challenge of working with students with disabilities and the opportunity to establish meaningful relationships with them. Although helping these students can be highly rewarding, the work also can be emotionally and physically draining. Many special education teachers are under considerable stress due to heavy workloads and administrative tasks. They must produce a substantial amount of paperwork documenting each student's progress, and they work under the threat of litigation by students' parents if correct procedures are not followed or if the parents feel that their child is not receiving an adequate education. The physical and emotional demands of the job cause some special education teachers to leave the occupation.

Some schools offer year-round education for special education students, but most special education teachers work only the traditional 10-month school year.

Employment

Special education teachers held a total of about 433,000 jobs in 2002. A great majority, almost 90 percent, work in public schools. Another 7 percent work at private schools. About half work in elementary schools. A few worked for individual and social assistance agencies or residential facilities, or in homebound or hospital environments.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

All 50 States and the District of Columbia require special education teachers to be licensed. The State board of education or a licensure advisory committee usually grants licenses, and licensure varies by State. In many States, special education teachers receive a general education credential to teach kindergarten through grade 12. These teachers then train in a specialty, such as learning disabilities or behavioral disorders. Some States offer general special education licenses, while others license several different specialties within special education, and still others require teachers to obtain a general education license first and an additional license in special education afterwards.

All States require a bachelor's degree and the completion of an approved teacher preparation program with a prescribed number of subject and education credits and supervised practice teaching. Many States require a master's degree in special education, involving at least 1 year of additional course work, including a specialization, beyond the bachelor's degree.

Some States have reciprocity agreements allowing special education teachers to transfer their licenses from one State to another, but many still require that the teacher pass licensing requirements for the State in which they work. In the future, employers may recognize certification or standards offered by a national organization.

Many colleges and universities across the United States offer programs in special education, at the undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degree levels. Special education teachers usually undergo longer periods of training than do general education teachers. Most bachelor's degree programs are 4-year programs that include general and specialized courses in special education. However, an increasing number of institutions are requiring a 5th year or other postbaccalaureate preparation. Among the courses offered are educational psychology, legal issues of special education, and child growth and development; courses imparting knowledge and skills needed for teaching students with disabilities also are given. Some programs require specialization, while others offer generalized special education degrees or a course of study in several specialized areas. The last year of the program usually is spent student teaching in a classroom supervised by a certified teacher.

Alternative and emergency licenses are available in many States, due to the need to fill special education teaching positions. Alternative licenses are designed to bring college graduates and those changing careers into teaching more quickly. Requirements for an alternative license may be less stringent than for a regular license. Requirements vary by State. In some programs, individuals begin teaching quickly under a provisional license and can obtain a regular license by teaching under the supervision of licensed teachers for a period of 1 to 2 years while taking education courses. Emergency licenses are granted when States have difficulty finding licensed special education teachers to fill positions.

Special education teachers must be patient, able to motivate students, understanding of their students' special needs, and accepting of differences in others. Teachers must be creative and apply different types of teaching methods to reach students who are having difficulty learning. Communication and cooperation are essential traits, because special education teachers spend a great deal of time interacting with others, including students, parents, and school faculty and administrators.

Special education teachers can advance to become supervisors or administrators. They may also earn advanced degrees and become instructors in colleges that prepare others to teach special education. In some school systems, highly experienced teachers can become mentors to less experienced ones, providing guidance to those teachers while maintaining a light teaching load.

Job Outlook

Employment of special education teachers is expected to increase faster than the average for all occupations through 2012. Although slowdowns in student enrollments may constrain employment growth somewhat, additional positions for these workers will be created by continued increases in the number of special education students needing services, by legislation emphasizing training and employment for individuals with disabilities, and by educational reforms requiring higher standards for graduation. The need to replace special education teachers who switch to general education, change careers altogether, or retire will lead to additional job openings. At the same time, many school districts report shortages of qualified teachers. As

a result, special education teachers should have excellent job prospects.

The job outlook varies by geographic area and specialty. Although many areas of the country report difficulty finding qualified applicants, positions in inner cities and rural areas usually are more plentiful than job openings in suburban or wealthy urban areas. Student populations, in general, also are expected to increase significantly in several States in the West and South, resulting in increased demand for special education teachers in those regions. In addition, job opportunities may be better in certain specialties—such as speech or language impairments and learning disabilities—because of large increases in the enrollment of special education students classified under those categories. Legislation encouraging early intervention and special education for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers has created a need for early childhood special education teachers. Bilingual special education teachers and those with multicultural experience also are needed to work with an increasingly diverse student population.

The number of students requiring special education services has grown steadily in recent years, a trend that is expected to continue. Learning disabilities will continue to be identified and diagnosed at earlier ages. In addition, medical advances have resulted in more children surviving serious accidents or illnesses, but with impairments that require special accommodations. The percentage of foreign-born special education students also is expected to grow, as teachers begin to recognize learning disabilities in that population. Finally, more parents are expected to seek special services for those of their children who have difficulty meeting the new, higher standards required of students.

Earnings

Median annual earnings in 2002 of special education teachers who worked primarily in preschools, kindergartens, and elementary schools were \$42,690. The middle 50 percent earned between \$34,160 and \$54,340. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$28,680, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$67,810.

Median annual earnings in 2002 of middle school special education teachers were \$41,350. The middle 50 percent earned between \$33,460 and \$52,370. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$28,560, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$65,070.

Median annual earnings in 2002 of special education teachers who worked primarily in secondary schools were \$44,130. The middle 50 percent earned between \$35,320 and \$56,850. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$29,630, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$71,020.

In 2002, about 62 percent of special education teachers belonged to unions—mainly the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association—that bargain with school systems over wages, hours, and the terms and conditions of employment.

In most schools, teachers receive extra pay for coaching sports and working with students in extracurricular activities. Some teachers earn extra income during the summer, working in the school system or in other jobs.

Related Occupations

Special education teachers work with students who have disabilities and special needs. Other occupations involved with the identification, evaluation, and development of students with

disabilities include psychologists, social workers, speech-language pathologists and audiologists, counselors, teacher assistants, occupational therapists, recreational therapists, and teachers—preschool, kindergarten, elementary, middle, and secondary.

Sources of Additional Information

For information on professions related to early intervention and education for children with disabilities, a list of accredited schools, information on teacher certification and financial aid, and general information on related personnel issues—including recruitment, retention, and the supply of, and demand for, special education professionals—contact

► National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education, Council for Exceptional Children, 1110 N. Glebe Rd., Suite 300, Arlington, VA 22201. Internet: <http://www.special-ed-careers.org>

To learn more about the special education teacher certification and licensing requirements in your State, contact your State's department of education.